DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 103 PS 025 562

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TITLE When Mom and Dad Help: Student Reflections on Parent Involvement with Homework.
PUB DATE Apr 97
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Grade 6; *Homework; Intermediate Grades; Mathematics Instruction; *Middle Schools; *Parent Participation; Parent Student Relationship; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Parents as Teachers; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Developmentally Appropriate Programs

ABSTRACT

Most children do not come home from school empty-handed, but laden with one or more assignments to be completed at home and returned to school the next day. Research suggests that parental involvement with homework can enable and enhance its positive effect. This study investigated middle-grades students' perceptions about parental involvement with homework. Sixth-grade students (n=67) completed 20 mathematics homework assignments designed to involve parents and then completed a survey including explanations about their experiences. Results of the survey indicated that a significant number of these students believe they do better in school when their parents help them with homework. Nevertheless, students reported mixed perceptions about how much they enjoyed working with their parents. Many perceptions focused on the extent to which parents either facilitated or confused the students' understanding of homework concepts, and the positive or negative effect associated with parent-child interactions. Results suggested that educators should explore ways to support parents' understanding of homework concepts and the use of developmentally appropriate strategies for helping their children with homework. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/EV)

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When Mom and Dad Help:

Student Reflections on Parent Involvement with Homework

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Abstract

This study investigated middle-grades students' perceptions about parental involvement with homework. Sixty-seven sixth-grade students completed 20 mathematics homework assignments designed to involve parents and then completed a survey including explanations about their experiences. Results of the survey indicated that a significant number of these students believe they do better in school when their parents help them with homework. Nevertheless, students reported mixed perceptions about how much they enjoyed working with their parents. Many perceptions focused on the extent to which parents either facilitated or confused the students' understanding of homework concepts and the positive or negative affect associated with parent/child interactions. Implications suggest that educators should explore ways to support parents' understanding of homework concepts and use of developmentally appropriate strategies for helping their children with homework.

When Mom and Dad Help:

Student Reflections on Parent Involvement with Homework

Most children do not come home from school empty handed, but laden with one or more assignments to be completed at home and returned to school the next day. At its best, homework is intended to help students practice and reinforce concepts they have studied in school, and a synthesis of research indicates that homework does have a positive effect on learning (Walberg, Paschal, & Weinstein, 1985). Research further suggests that parental involvement with homework can enable and enhance its positive effect (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Epstein, 1992; Keith, 1992; Leone & Richards, 1989). Nevertheless, Corno (1996) asserted that homework is a complicated thing that rarely plays out in a family in the idealized way intended by teachers, parents, and policymakers.

Consider the interaction between parents and children surrounding homework completion. Interviews with parents indicate an ongoing interest and even enjoyment in helping their children with homework and becoming aware of what their children are learning in school (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Burow, 1995). At the same time, many parents lament that monitoring homework completion can drain their energy and patience, and inadequate skills can hinder their efforts (Corno, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 1984). But how about the children? How do they perceive parental involvement with homework?

The purpose of this study was to examine parental involvement with children's homework from the children's perspective. Specifically, 67 middle-grades students were surveyed after completing 20 mathematics homework assignments designed to involve parents ("Teachers

Involve Parents in Schoolwork," Epstein, 1988). Students provided information on how often they worked with a parent, the extent to which they enjoyed working with a parent, and their perceptions of whether or not they do better in school if a parent helps them with homework.

According to Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995), parents who are involved in school-related activities such as homework can enable and enhance their child's education in three ways: (1) modeling, (2) reinforcement, and (3) direct instruction. For example, when parents help children with homework they *model* their belief that educational pursuits are worthy of their time and effort. Further, when parents praise children for correctly completing homework they *reinforce* the goals of education. Finally, when parents provide *direct instruction* by drilling their children on homework problems and asking open-ended questions they promote factual learning and cognitive ability.

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) caution that the enabling and enhancing influence of parent involvement is tempered by two variables: (1) developmentally appropriate involvement strategies, and (2) the match between parental involvement strategies and teacher expectations. For example, if the strategies used by parents are *developmentally appropriate* for a given child, the involvement is likely to be positive. In particular, when children perceive that the involvement feels appropriate, the involvement will likely be more useful. In addition, children respond to expectations from both their teacher and parents. If there is a good *match* between the expectations and requests of teachers and parents, children can focus on the task at hand (e.g., homework) without the added demand of translating or negotiating the strategies of teachers and parents.

The need for more research on parent involvement with their children's middle-grades homework was highlighted in the National Education Goals Report (1995) which found that 65% of parents reported helping their first-grade child with homework, but the percentage dropped to 14% by eighth grade. The report did not indicate the nature of the interaction when parents helped their children with homework. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) pointed out that developmentally appropriate strategies are often easier for parents of younger than for parents of older children. The present study sought to better understand parent involvement with middle-grades homework by examining how students perceived the interaction between themselves and their parents.

Method

Sixty-seven Caucasian sixth graders and their parents participated in the study. The students were enrolled in one of three mathematics classes taught by the same teacher in a midwestern middle-school. Over a three-month period, each student completed 20 mathematics homework assignments designed to involve parents (100% return rate). Each homework assignment was printed on one sheet of paper and included three sections: (1) instruction on the skills to be learned; (2) examples of skills with sample problems to be solved; and (3) a practical application activity.

Procedure

After the 20 assignments were completed, each student anonymously completed a three question survey. Question #1 asked students to indicate whether or not they worked on the assignments with their parents (or other family members) by checking *Always*, *Sometimes*, or *Never* on the survey. Students who worked with their parents at least some of the time were

asked to answer two additional questions. Question #2 asked students if they enjoyed working with their parents on the homework assignments by checking *Yes, No,* or *Sometimes yes and Sometimes no* on the survey. Question #3 asked students if they believed they do better in school when their parents help them with homework (*Yes, No,* or *Sometimes yes and Sometimes no).* Students who answered the last two survey questions were asked to explain their answers in writing. Answers to the three questions were tabulated and a Chi-square analysis was conducted on each question. The written explanations for the last two questions were sorted by common themes.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the survey results for the three questions.

Insert Table 1 about here

Answers to Question #1 indicated that a significant number of students (48) experienced parental involvement with the 20 homework assignments at least some of the time (chi-square = 49.28, df = 2, $p < .001$). Seventeen students reported that they always worked with their parent(s) on the assignments. Two students reported that they never worked with their parent(s) on the assignments. The 65 students who indicated that they worked with their parent(s) *Always* or *Sometimes* were asked to answer the remaining two questions.

Answers to Question #2 suggested that a significant number of students (34) sometimes did and sometimes did not enjoy working with their parent(s) on the assignments (chi-square = 18.86, df = 2, $p < .001$). Twenty-five students reported that they did enjoy working with their

parents on the assignments. Six students reported that although they worked with their parents on the assignments, they did not enjoy it.

Answers to Question #3 found that a significant number of students (40) perceived they do better in school if their parent(s) help them with homework (chi-square = 31.6, df = 2, $p < .001$). Twenty-two students reported that they believe they sometimes do better in school when their parents help them with homework. Three students reported that parental involvement with homework does not help them do better in school.

All 65 students who experienced parental involvement with homework (i.e., answered *Yes* or *Sometimes* to Question #1) offered written explanations for the last two survey questions. The written explanations were sorted by common themes and are reported below.

Written Explanations

Question #2: *Did you enjoy working with your parent(s) or other family members on the homework assignments?*

Twenty-five students answered *Yes* to Question #2 (See Table 1). Two themes (i.e., 20 comments) emerged from the students' explanations about why they enjoyed working with their parents; (1) Better understanding of homework (12 comments), *"Sometimes I didn't know how to do the work and my dad did," "It helped to know it better when someone helps me,"* and *"If I don't understand it, they do,"* and (2) Positive affect (8 comments), *"It was nice knowing he was willing to help," "It's about the only time I had to really sit down with my mom," "I only needed help sometimes, and my family were pretty nice about it."*

Thirty-four students were more tentative on Question #2 by checking *Sometimes Yes and Sometimes No* when asked if they enjoyed working with their parents on homework.

Interestingly, the same two themes emerged for this group's written explanations as emerged for those answering *Yes*; (1) Understanding (11 comments) , *"Sometimes my dad would tell me a different method and it would confuse me," "Mom didn't understand when I tried explaining,"* and *"Sometimes they thought they were right when they were wrong,"* and (2) Mixed affect (11 comments), *It depended on the mood I was in," "I was mad at them on some occasions," "Sometimes my mom didn't like to do homework with me when she had had a hard day," "Sometimes my sister would be grumpy and wouldn't really try to work with me, but I liked working with my mom."*

Another frustration, according to these more tentative students, centered on help that lasted too long. For example, *"I did not have much time and it takes longer to work with parents," "I had fun with a family member when they didn't take five minutes explaining one problem," "Well, my family member sometimes got 'into it' and spent another 30 minutes going further."* Still another issue involved divided attention. For example, *"Sometimes when I didn't need their help they'd try to help me, and when I did need their help they were busy doing something else," "Sometimes my dad would walk off after helping me with a question," "It's hard to get full attention when you have a brother."*

Six students answered *No* to Question #2 asserting that they did not enjoy parental involvement with homework. As one student explained, *"It made me frustrated because my dad uses vocabulary I don't know yet and he says it so fast."* Another student apparently didn't want an accuracy check, *"When I work with my parents, everything has to be right."*

Question #3: *In general, do you believe you do better in school when your parent(s) help you with homework?"*

Forty students (out of 65) answered *Yes* to this question. Three themes emerged from comments; (1) Accuracy (9 comments), *"If I get the wrong answer, they correct me," "Parents can catch your mistake," "They check over the assignment,"* and (2) Understanding (19 comments), *"I understand it better when my parents help so I can do better in school," "They explain it better sometimes,"* (3) Parents' Role (7 comments), *"Somebody with experience helps with the answer," "They are there to help me," "They are smart and usually know what they are doing," "I'm not really into homework so I tend to put it off. With my dad's help, it gets done on time."* One student indicated that help is needed occasionally to maintain good grades, *"I'm an A average student already, but at times parents can help,"* while another student reported that a parent was responsible for the good grade, *"Well, so far last quarter I got an A because my mom helped me."*

Twenty-two students were more tentative, answering that parental involvement with homework sometimes helped them do better in school. These comments suggested two themes; (1) Understanding (11 comments), *"On hard things they help me understand it better, but on others they confuse me when I think I already know how to do the problem," "Sometimes I don't understand the teacher and then my mom helps me," "Sometimes the parent doesn't know how to do the homework, but they think they do so it confuses me,"* and (2) Conflicting ideas (6 comments) *"Sometimes I put the right answer and my parents tell me to change it," "It gets confusing sometimes when your parent says something different than the teacher," "There's an old style (parents) and a new style (kids) of how to work problems."*

Three students reported that parental involvement with homework does not help their academic performance. For example, *"Well, school is for you to learn, and sometimes your parents end up doing the work," "Your parent will give you the answer and you don't learn anything."*

Discussion

This study suggested that parent involvement operated through the three mechanisms described by Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995); (1) Modeling, (parents spent time doing homework with their children, modeling that school-related activities are worth their time and effort), (2) Reinforcement, (parents offered attention and interest as indicated by several comments of positive affect), and (3) Direct instruction, (some parents checked answers and helped students understand concepts). Most of the explanations students offered for the last two survey questions focused on the third mechanism of parent involvement - direct instruction.

Interestingly, the explanations regarding direct instruction involved mixed perceptions about the relationship between parental involvement with homework and the students' understanding of the homework concepts. According to most students, parents either helped them understand the assignment (e.g., *"My dad helped me understand the work better"*) or parents confused the student (e.g., *"Some parents confuse you or give you the wrong idea").* Further, some students liked to have parents check answers (e.g., *"They make sure the assignment is right")* and others did not (e.g., *"I didn't like working with my parents because everything had to be right"*). It is interesting to note, however, that a significant number of students perceived that parental involvement with homework helps the students do better in school. And, for many students in this study the perception that parental involvement has

long-term benefits was not impeded by the short-term irritations that sometimes accompanied working with parents on homework.

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) asserted that the benefits of parental involvement are tempered by the extent to which parental involvement strategies are developmentally appropriate and by the match between parental involvement strategies and teacher expectations. Both of these tempering variables existed in this study. Parent involvement was not always perceived as developmentally appropriate (e.g., *"It made me frustrated because my dad uses vocabulary I don't know yet and he says it so fast," "Well, my parents sometimes got into it and spent another 30 minutes going further"*). Sometimes, students perceived a poor match between their teacher's and parent(s)' understanding of the assignment (e.g., *Sometimes my dad would tell me a different method from the teacher and it would confuse me," "It gets confusing sometimes when your parent says something different than the teacher"*).

Researchers and policy makers assert the value of parental involvement to influence positive educational outcomes for children (Epstein & Connors, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; National Education Goals Report, 1995; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). It is essential for practice that we not only examine ways to increase levels of parental involvement but increase its effectiveness as well. Most students in this study perceived that parental involvement helps them do better in school, consequently, the findings of this study lend support the enabling and enhancing influence of parental involvement with their children's homework (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Nevertheless, some students perceived that parental involvement with homework can confuse the students' understanding of homework concepts and

worse yet, that an occasional parent will *"give kids the answer"* instead of using strategies to help students understand and reinforce the concepts they have studied in school.

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) suggested that younger children's homework assignments are often well within the range of many parents' abilities and involvement strategies. However, as children enter the middle-grades, their natural enthusiasm for parental involvement as well as parents' ability to understand homework concepts and select appropriate involvement strategies tends to wane. Perhaps this contributes to the dramatic decline in parental involvement with homework as children leave elementary school and enter the middle grades (National Education Goals Report, 1995). Underscored by the results of this study, educators should explore ways to support more parents as they make an effort to understand homework concepts and select developmentally appropriate strategies for helping their children with homework.

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Table 1

Student perceptions of parental involvement with homework.

Survey Questions	Responses		
Ques. 1: Did your parent(s) help you with the 20 homework assignments? (n = 67)	Always 17	Never 2	Sometimes 48
Ques. 2: Did you enjoy working with your parent(s) on these homework assignments? (n = 65)	Yes 25	No 6	Sometimes yes and sometimes no 34
Ques. 3: In general, do you believe you do better in school when your parent(s) help you with homework? (n = 65)	Yes 40	No 3	Sometimes yes and sometimes no 22

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